

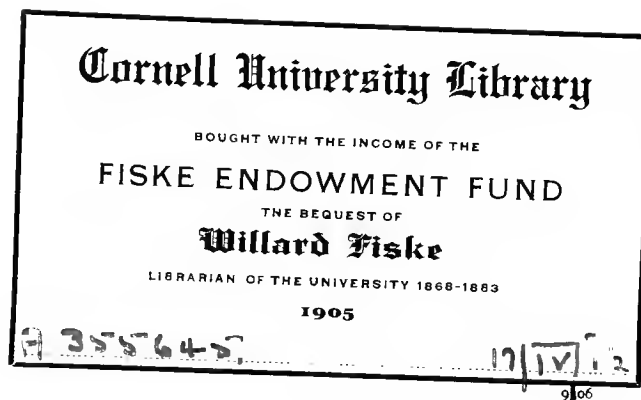
PORTRAITS
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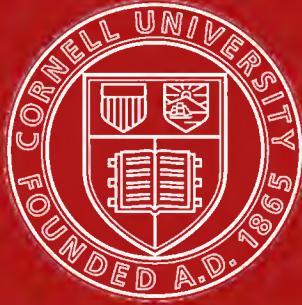


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Portraits by Sir Henry Raeburn,



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PORTRAITS

BY

SIR HENRY RAE BURN

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PORTRAITS
BY
SIR HENRY RAE BURN

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY
JAMES L. CAW

DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL GALLERIES OF SCOTLAND

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

To write of Sir Henry Raeburn and his art at this time of day is all but superfluous. Biographed, within a few years of his death, by Allan Cunningham in a highly interesting and informative, if not wholly reliable, manner, and, during the past five-and-twenty years, neglected by no well-informed critic of British painting, all, or almost all, that is known of Raeburn's life and methods has become as familiar as a more than twice-told tale. Moreover his work, when reproduced in anything like an adequate manner, suffers singularly little from translation into black and white. Even at its best, however, reproduction, no matter what the process, can only hint the character of a fine artist's handling. That is as untranslatable as the subtleties of expression and the nuances of verbal melody which give poetry in its original form full beauty and significance. Still, apart from the remarkably virile and expressive quality of Raeburn's actual brush-work—the trenchant and simplified handling of his earlier period, in which a very few brush-strokes summarised a whole passage of elaborate modelling, or the wonderful fusion of his most mature period, when he attained an extraordinary complete rendering of suavely rounded and subtly lighted form by a manner which appears almost as simple as the obvious *premier coup* handling from which it was evolved—the series of photogravures in this volume gives an exceedingly good idea of Raeburn's style as an artist, and of his success as a delineator of character. Based much more on chiaroscuro than on colour, and, although sound, not subtle in colour, Raeburn's compositions carry exceedingly well into black and white, in which they retain almost all their dignity and lose little of their charm.

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In his earlier work the design is very largely a matter of spacing, comparatively little influenced by play of colour within the masses or subtilities of modelling inside the larger forms. The colour is rather negative in character, and unmodulated in quality; the planes are generalised, and the modelling boldly reduced to its simplest elements; what little shadow there is is too often quite arbitrary in kind and too obviously arranged. As his manner evolved, the results he attained became fuller, richer, subtler. His colour lost its inclination to greyiness of tone, broken by positive passages of pure colour, and assumed fuller glow and greater and richer harmony; his modelling became rounded, fused, and exceedingly complete; his use of chiaroscuro lost its arbitrary look, and, becoming an integral part of the pictorial design, gave his compositions enhanced decorative richness, and the ensembles of his pictures far more resonance of effect. But even his latest work is not dependent, as is that of the colourists *par excellence*, upon subtilities of tint, transition and contrast.

Nor does his rendering of character suffer much from reproduction. Black and white cannot, of course, express the glow or the pallidness of complexion, and the darkness or blondness of colouring, which are perhaps the most distinctive marks of certain faces; nor can it render the passing gleams or subtle tints in the eyes, which alone sometimes give a face special character. Lord Newton without his "port-wine flavoured" hue and little sleepy eyes is less "The Mighty" of tradition, and Mrs Scott Moncrieff without the soft peach-like bloom of her complexion and the dusky softness of her hair is shorn of some of her alluring yet abiding charm. Even without these, however, Raeburn's claim to rank as the greatest British painter of portraits as such is clearly evident from the reproductions of these pictures given here, and the same is true of almost every plate in this book. Time and again,

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as one turns the plates over, one is struck by the extraordinary capacity Raeburn possessed for painting life to the quick. No wonder Robert Louis Stevenson, writing of the three hundred and twenty-five Raeburns which hung in the Edinburgh galleries in 1876, thought that they were “racier than many anecdotes, and more complete than many a volume of sententious memoirs.” Or that Ruskin wrote to Dr John Brown, “I don’t think Raeburn ever *flattered*, drew the essence of the man, whether *he* liked it or not.”

While his achievement as a whole is somewhat lacking in the sense of beauty and the spirituelle element, which charm one so in Gainsborough’s art, and Sir Joshua was his superior in dignified decorative design and, at times, attained an epical quality of conception which was outside Raeburn’s gift, the great Scottish painter possessed a keener perception of personal character in men and women, and set the fruits of his insight down in a manner which surpassed theirs in sheer technical accomplishment and in soundness of method. From the purely technical standpoint, he was perhaps the very greatest of British painters. He possessed, to a degree unequalled by any other, that essential quality of mastership, which consists in complete control of the chosen medium of expression, and in using it in a manner which is lasting, or, at least, little influenced by time.

Eminently characteristic of his art, the fifty-six portraits, which form this selection, are at once a survey and a summary of what Raeburn accomplished. They include examples of his work before he went to Italy, of what he did immediately after his return, and exemplify very fully the evolution of his style from then until the end, which came when he was still at the very height of his powers. Arranged in approximate chronological order, they show his whole development, and represent very adequately the essential character of his achieve-

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ment as an artist. Moreover, although chosen as examples of his art, and without consideration of the distinction or personal interest of the sitters, they reveal in very convincing fashion the range of his sympathies, and his wonderful grasp of diverse character.

To add to this brief note any detailed account of Raeburn's career is unnecessary. The plates speak for themselves, and comparison of them, one with the others, forms their fittest commentary. Still, as memory is sometimes at fault, a few of the leading events and dates in his life may be set down here.

Born in Edinburgh in 1756, and left an orphan when only six, Raeburn was educated at Heriot's Hospital, and, at the age of fifteen, was apprenticed to a jeweller and goldsmith in his native city. While still an apprentice he began to paint miniatures, and he took professionally to painting life-size portraits in oils before his time was out. Except for a few hints from David Deuchar, a seal-engraver and amateur artist, and some intercourse with, but no instruction from, David Martin, the chief portrait-painter of the day in Scotland, he was entirely self-taught. But he modelled himself on the best examples available, and, following his own instinct, early arrived at a style which expressed his personal observation in a singularly direct and expressive way. Marriage with one of his sitters, a year after he attained his majority, brought him considerable fortune; but it was not until 1785—when he spent a few weeks in London, where he is said to have worked in Reynolds's studio—that he went to Italy. This two years sojourn abroad enriched and matured his art, without altering its essential character, and, almost immediately on his return, he took the leading place amongst Scottish portrait-painters, and retained it, with ever increasing reputation, until his death in 1823. During these six-and-thirty years, he painted almost everybody who was anybody in

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Scotland, and produced a series of portraits which represents with great artistic power and extraordinary insight almost every phase of Scottish character. His work was done entirely in Scotland, but the few portraits he exhibited in London, where he had thoughts of settling about 1810, led to his election as Associate of the Royal Academy in 1812, and as Academician in 1815. On the occasion of the visit of George IV. to Edinburgh in 1822, Raeburn was knighted, and a few months later he was appointed His Majesty's Limner for Scotland.

JAMES L. CAW.

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